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Poverty and Unemployment in Nqutu  
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Much attention of late has been focussed on the present economic problems our country faces. Almost daily we hear of additional rises in the cost of living and in the number of industries being forced to close down or shorten their working hours. However, very little attention has been directed to the effect of inflation on the homelands wherein approximately 44% of the total population is domiciled.

In the course of this discussion I would like to concentrate specifically on the problems we are encountering and the trends we are observing in KwaZulu which is no doubt fairly typical for a rural homelands area. To put you in the picture I would like to start with a brief physical description of the Nqutu area. The area extends over 165 057 hectares and the population has rocketed from 30 307 in 1950 to within 85-90 000 in 1976. A fact worth bearing in mind is that the Tomlinson Commission of 1950 estimated that if the area was fully developed agriculturally it could support a population of 13 000 people.

Agriculturally the area is very poor - in 1974 the 20 374 hectares of maize fields produced an average of 0,6 or a 90kg bag per hectare as compared with 6,98 bags produced on white farms in 1949. Much of the land is unsuitable for agriculture because of the huge boulders and stones that abound in many areas. Our rainfall is in the region of 800mm per annum, but water supplies are poor. Dams have silted up completely and most families depend on open unprotected springs, rivers, dongas or one of the dozen or so government boreholes for domestic consumption. Soil erosion is rife as a result of the overcrowding and overgrazing.

There are about 2 000 employment opportunities within the area - the KwaZulu Government Service and the hospital being the chief employers. Shortage of land, a high cost of living and the unavailability of work in the homelands thus forces the very great majority of able-bodied men to seek employment outside the area.

I will discuss the disruptive effect of the migratory labour system on the rural family at a later point but obviously the majority of families are totally dependent on income remitted by the migrant worker outside of the area. When I investigated the income for families in 1973 I found that most families were existing on about R14 per month of which R9 came from the migrant workers, R2 was earned in the homelands from home industries, and R3 came from Old Age Pensions and Disability Grants.

I found the average family to number about seven people, three adults and four children. Earlier this year in another survey we found the income had increased, no doubt as a result of the higher wages paid in the urban areas and the increase in pension allowances. Most families were receiving about R18-R22 per month. In 1973 we found the Poverty Datum Line figure for the area to amount to about R87 per month. Revising the Poverty Datum Line earlier this year we found that there were substantial increases in food and fuel costs with the result that the Poverty Datum Line is now in the region of R120 per month. In our calculations we included food, fuel, clothing and cleansing materials only; we did not include Tax, Housing, Transport, Education etc.

The situation is further complicated by other factors:

Firstly, the income received is very often inconsistent. One month a family may receive R15, nothing the next month, and R25 the third month. Thus it is impossible for a rural housewife to budget effectively and she is forced to buy in small quantities: a candle, a tin of fish, and half a loaf of bread today, a box of matches, 250 grams of beans, a small tin of powdered milk tomorrow and so on. Thus her meagre sum of money does not get used to its best advantage.

Secondly, the lack of a distribution and communication network aggravates the poverty in many ways. Although there are about forty trading stores serving the area not more than a dozen or so supply fresh milk, fruit and vegetables. Transport costs are exorbitant; most of the traders collect their goods from wholesalers in Dundee and transport it up to 100 kms to their shops. As a result consumers pay very high prices for essential foodstuffs like bread and milk which are frequently less than fresh on their arrival at the shop. One shop I know serving a very large densely populated area charges 25 cents a loaf for brown bread, 30 cents for 500 mls of milk and 65 cents for a large tin of fish.

The inadequacy of the communication network also presents problems for the unemployed. Influx laws prevent prospective workers moving to town in search of employment and all recruitment is channelled through the Labour Bureaux and its tribal offices. However, the onus is on the work-seeker to report to the Labour Bureau in the hope of being recruited. Some firms do give advance notice if they are planning on sending a representative to recruit labour for them. In such cases the word gets around but for those living in the remoter areas it is a time-consuming, costly and soul-destroying business journeying to the Labour Bureau two or three times a week in the hope of being recruited.

The number of unemployed men in our area is beginning to reach alarming proportions although, as always, statistics indicating the unemployment figure amongst Blacks do not seem readily available. In January this year I was advised by a local Labour Bureau official that there were two thousand men on his waiting list. That of course, does not include the numbers of men who for reasons of not having the proper documents, or who having fallen in arrears with their tax payments are not eligible for registration as a work-seeker. It would appear too that really vicious forces have come into play over Reference Books; some men have not had their Reference Books 'signed off' by previous employers. Prospective employers sometimes regard this as an indication that the man absconded from his last place of work which often in fact is not the case. Another man I know worked for three different companies in the space of six months - the first was a two month contract job; thereafter he got another job when the contract ended; after two months he heard of a better paid job and resigned to take up the better paid job. After two months in the better paid job he contracted a very unpleasant and persistent eye disease which he felt was due to the dusty conditions under which he worked. He needed medical investigation and treatment and so resigned from his job to undergo hospitalisation. Subsequently, his child has been very ill with malnutrition. When I asked why he did not return to work he pointed out that prospective employers look at his record of employment in his Reference Book and quickly turn him down because it appears that he is not a steady worker. There are numbers of men doomed to perpetual unemployment because something about their Reference Book is not quite in order or somehow gives an unsatisfactory impression about its holder. There are also numbers of men without Reference Books or who have fallen hopelessly into arrears over payment of taxes, who get totally ensnared in a vicious circle of poverty: they cannot try to find work because their documents are not in order, and their documents are not in order because they have no way of securing the money to get them in order. There is very little assistance for men finding themselves in this situation in the rural areas and very often the problems are never resolved.

I said earlier that in January this year there were 2 000 work-seekers registered at our local Labour Bureau. As far as a Labour Bureau officer could remember the last significant number of men recruited (meaning a 100 or so) was in April this year and since then hundreds have been retrenched and sent back to the homelands.

We at the hospital are now feeling the full impact of the economic crisis and our statistics reflect the deteriorating situation:

In 1974 20 children died of malnutrition in our hospital, in 1975 the figure increased to 33 children. By the end of August this year 40 children had died representing a hundred per cent increase on the 1974 figure. Time and time again during the course of our investigations into families we have found that the breadwinner is unemployed. There have been significant increases also in the incidence of pellagra amongst adults admitted, very often associated with chronic heavy drinking. Mental diseases are also beginning to reach alarming proportions. The aged, the mentally and physically handicapped, the unwanted children are all falling rapidly on the malnutrition wayside.

What do we do? We admit these unfortunate folk, we jack up their nutritional state, and then we discharge them again, back into the same deprived environment from which they came. A widow with two minor children and absolutely no means of support (maintenance grants for widows are not readily available in the homelands) has had her two children admitted for a total of 868 days over the past four years at a total cost of R5,208 to the State. Some parents have approached us and asked to keep their children permanently admitted in hospital as they do not have the resources to properly care for them at home. We have three children at the moment that I am trying to make alternative arrangements for.

We are rapidly reaching a situation of total social chaos and what is most discouraging and frustrating is that it is very difficult to convince the powers that be that we are dealing with a radically deteriorating situation in the homelands. It is even more difficult to persuade them that there are steps that could be taken to prevent further deterioration.

It is well known that prolonged malnutrition in childhood leads to stunting of growth both mentally and physically and bearing in mind that about 40% of all children admitted to hospital irrespective of their diagnosis are noted to be stunted, it would appear that our future population may have an abnormally high proportion of disabled people to support.

I am disturbed by the number of these unfortunate people that grow up to be fathers and mothers of another generation of mentally and physically stunted people so that the very unsatisfactory situation is being proliferated and perpetuated.

Besides the poverty and unemployment the other major factor which contributes to our social chaos is the migratory labour system. This system fosters an anti-social life style because it denies people the experience of meaningful family life which is widely accepted as the essential foundation for the development of sound personalities, stable communities and healthy nations. The need to earn a living away from home leads to wholesale disruption of family life; there is no model of home life, no model of the roles of husband and wife, mother and father, particularly in the situation where the mother goes to work in the urban areas as well. The knowledge of these things is not instinctive - it is inculcated into one by one's home experience. It is true that many rural children grow up enjoying much affection and care from mothers and grandparents but they are nearly all separated for long periods of time from their fathers. As Dr. Trudi points out in her booklet Their Doctor Speaks: "It is fundamental to realise that African relationships, as in all cultures, depend on loyalty and affection. These bounds depend on mutual support and comfort, on shared experiences and responsibilities and companionship. All these must be sacrificed when the man goes away for long periods, becoming virtually a visitor in his own home." Under these circumstances relationships fall to pieces very easily - the number of marriages that fall apart, the number of families that have been deserted by the fathers and/or mothers, the degree of infidelity are all reaching alarming proportions. Added to this, people see that marriage has very little to offer, and expectations are low: "it is a thing in name only", as one of our TB patients who is a migrant worker put it.

Under such conditions illegitimacy has now become a norm of our society. I have heard it said that 90% of first babies born to women in our area are illegitimate. Numbers of these children are unwanted and from the time they are conceived they are seen as a nuisance. They are dumped as soon as possible after birth in the hands of other relatives who may or may not have the resources and inclination to properly care for them. Such children grow up grossly deprived - deprived of affection and very often food. Nobody really cares for them, nobody notices them,

nobody comforts them, they in fact bring themselves up. All the factors commonly accepted as leading to decent social behaviour, attitudes and standards are specifically lacking in these children. Little wonder then that they grow up as if specifically trained to indecent behaviour, attitudes and standards. They are popularly called "tsotsis" and we are led to believe that they have played a prominent role in the present unrest in urban areas. Skilled police officers can apparently recognise "tsotsis" by their walk, their language, their whistle, and their clothing as we have heard in evidence before the Cillie commission. I hope those police officers will pursue their study to examine the sort of family life and the sort of society that produces this undesirable element. Psychologists have studied in great depth the effects of deprivation on children and I quote from The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour by Michael Argyl describing the effects of deprivation and gross social disorganisation on the individual. "They cannot form relationships of friendship, love or permanent attachment with other people. They are not concerned about the welfare or sufferings of others, are basically indifferent to them and quite lacking in remorse for their own past acts; it is as if they are unable to understand how other people are feeling ... There is a childhood history of lack of love, illtreatment, neglect, lack of discipline and a lack of a stable home combined with certain social conditions - social and economic deprivation and absence of satisfying work opportunities."

I find it most disturbing that so many children in our area are growing up under those sort of conditions to become the sort of adults described above; directly as a result of the migratory labour system. Time and time again in my work I have to interview mothers who are neglecting their children. For me it is a painful business - you cannot get through and there is no better judgement you can appeal to as the poverty, the deprivation and a dehumanised existence has produced an emotionally blunted individual. The damage is irreversible.

There are many who see these problems as being inherently "African", part of the African "way of life" and therefore not even problems. But I have spent much time talking to our old people who remember well the good old days of a subsistence economy when there was enough land for grazing and when wild fruits abounded in the veld. It was a hard simple existence, but it was a good life and the family lived and functioned

as a unit. All of this has been destroyed and replaced by disruption, disorganisation and much deprivation.

It is easy to list all the faults in the system and to highlight the resultant problems. It is very much harder to come up with solutions, especially within our political and economic framework. As we are at present taking a good hard look at the migratory labour system we have invited our patients, most of whom are migrant workers, to participate in discussions on the subject. We have asked them what their feelings are about alternatives to the system and I would like to share with you some of their suggestions.

Firstly, they have indicated very strongly that many of them would not like to take their families to town with them as they feel the urban areas are no place for their wives and children. Many of them in fact wish that it was feasible for them to remain at home and farm as they did in the old days. If it was possible for a man to have enough land to farm properly and if he received assistance with his farming then this would be the way of life many men would opt for. They also resented new resettlement areas which did not allow for any farming activities as this was seen as a way of forcing men on to the labour market at a time when there was widespread unemployment. Also, during the discussion the men pleaded for industries to be brought nearer the rural areas so that they could at least get home for weekends etc.

In fact, all of what they said made very good sense. As I see it much greater assistance is needed with agriculture in the homelands. Many families will leave fields uncultivated this year because they cannot plough them or they cannot afford to buy seed and fertilizer. The land is being ruined and neglected because of inadequate support for the peasant farmer.

I have distributed vegetable seeds to about sixty families this spring. I do it in an entirely personal capacity as no assistance seems to be forthcoming from the Department of Agriculture. We are also assisting on a very limited scale with fencing for vegetable gardens and some groups are getting good results. However, what we are able to do nowhere near meets the needs of the area.



No industrialist in his right mind would consider setting up any sort of industry in our area: there is very little in the way of raw materials and water supplies are very poor. We have no power supply and the nearest rail head is 53 kms away. However, the establishment of cottage industries supported by industry in the urban areas would do much to alleviate the poverty. I understand there are fairly large deposits of coal in the area, yet winter is a time of extreme hardship for many people as coal is within the region of R2 a bag. We need someone to expose a few seams of coal and set up a small mine so that local people have a cheaper source of fuel. A cottage industry making rainwater tanks and guttering would be a great asset and would help a great deal to alleviate the water shortage.

The women in our area have proved themselves capable of making very attractive handwork. We started a few months ago to buy this up and send it to Durban for resale. Within a space of a few months we were faced with a chaotic situation in that it became almost a full-time job dealing with craftwork. The supply far exceeded our organisational ability to resell the finished product. It was tragic - the motivation towards self-help was there, the finished articles were in demand but there was inadequate organisation and support for the project. There was no one who could really concentrate on expanding the project with the result that it has petered out.

I feel very strongly that it is time urban industry started compensating the rural areas for the deprivations that result from the migratory labour system. This compensation should be in the form of hard cash for development projects, the setting up of cottage industries etc. The compensation could also be in kind, e.g. seconding personnel to help with the establishment of some of these projects.

In South Africa we have a situation whereby the development of urban industry occurs at the expense of the less developed rural areas. The rural homelands areas remain depressed, undeveloped and backward because urban industry saps all its strength in the form of able-bodied men. Then it dumps them back when they are redundant and no longer needed, completely unconcerned about their fate. It seems that the homelands serve no other purpose than as mail order depots for cheap labour as required. Right now business is bad - the supply far exceeds the demand.

We ignore this situation at our own peril; we are creating huge rural slums where despair and chaos are the order of the day. Unless urgent steps are taken to counter the poverty in the rural areas, we will create a situation where anything that offers an alternative way of life will seem preferable; what better situation could the Communists hope for? All responsible people should recognise this and acknowledge the need to ensure that the situation does not deteriorate to that point. This implies a need for very hard work and a high level of concern from the government and industry alike. The onus is on us to concern ourselves with the rural areas. I wonder whether we have the courage to meet the challenge.

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